

the Chaldean News

One-on-One with Mark Hackel Leading Macomb County Forward



by Vanessa Denha-Garmo - Chaldean News
January 28, 2011

On the last day of last year, Mark Hackel was sworn in as the first County Executive in Macomb County, which has a large and growing Chaldean community. Hackel's rise to this position was made possible by voters who wanted to change the structure of county government to operate in a similar manner to Oakland and Wayne counties. They also reduced the number of Macomb County commissioners from 26 to 13.

Co-Publisher and Editor in Chief Vanessa Denha Garmo recently sat down with Hackel, the county's former sheriff, inside his Mt. Clemens office. He shares his thoughts on serious issues while adding levity to the conversation.

CN: What's your impression of the Chaldean community?

MH: They are a partner in this region. I don't think of our region as being specific to any one area or one community. Chaldeans are very entrepreneurial. They are people who like to take on that challenge. They take chances by starting businesses. I truly believe they are a tremendous asset to this area, especially when it comes to creating business.

CN: There have been so many misconceptions about Chaldeans over the years -- for decades actually. Was there anything about Chaldeans surprising to you?

MH: I look at it from a police officer's perspective and as a person who has always been involved with others. I never look at somebody and think, "they are different so something must be wrong." I'm always curious about people. One of my best friends is Chaldean; I actually got to stand up in his wedding — Jason Abro. He's a deputy and he works within the detective bureau. He used to own a Power House Gym at 16 and Gratiot where I used to work out. We became friends. He had an interest in police work and I just thought this kid has a great demeanor — he has potential. He started taking classes, going to school and the next thing you know he became a dispatcher within our department. He is phenomenal.

CN: What was it like standing up in a Chaldean wedding?

MH: I don't like going to weddings because they are so boring; it's the same thing. You get there and see everybody you know. They exchange the vows. The bride throws the bouquet. It's the same old cheesy songs that they have from the band or from some DJ ...

CN: And then you go to a Chaldean wedding ...

MH: ... and it throws you right off. It is a lot of fun, except for the fact that you don't eat until 11 o'clock at night. I had a great time. And to stand up in it was even more exciting because so much was happening. The "cackle" thing scared the living crap out of me the first time I heard it.

CN: Oh, the halhole.

MH: That scared the living daylights out of me. It started and I was like, "whoa!" Kind of caught me off guard but then the wedding was so much fun.

CN: Did you enjoy the food and the music? Did you dance?

MH: Absolutely! The one dance the men do in the circle [demonstrates the khuga] — I was so intrigued by that. I was determined to learn that dance and I would not get off the dance floor until I did. It was hard. But it was interesting.

CN: What a great way to get an understanding of our culture. As residents of your county, how can Chaldeans get involved in Macomb County?

MH: I don't look at it as, what can a Chaldean do, I look at it like what can people do. It was the same in the Sheriff's Department; we didn't go out looking for somebody of a particular culture. Get engaged; don't be afraid to go looking for something that you want to be a part of or get involved in. Chaldeans are no different than any other member of society. Sometimes people get this feeling that they won't be accepted. It's kind of hard for people to embrace new things. I'm a very receptive person. If people want to help or support that'd be great. We have a reserve organization in the Sheriff's Department and that might be a good way to get in.

CN: Macomb County's population of Chaldeans is growing due to the many Iraqi Christian refugees coming in. What are your thoughts on this?

MH: You know this county started with people coming from other countries. It still always has been open to the opportunity for people to find themselves, find their freedoms. We fear sometimes that people won't accept us or are treating us differently. I don't know if that's true. People are so consumed by their own day-to-day work and business and lifestyle. I don't look at it as there is an influx of refugees from Iraq coming here and they are Chaldean. If there are problems or there are impediments, people treating you differently, then there are issues that need to be addressed.

CN: You mentioned Mr. Abro working with you. Are there any other Chaldeans in your administration?

MH: There are in the Sheriff's Department but I don't know the extent of the entire county and who is in every department.

CN: You are still figuring out the lay of the land?

MH: I am not fluent in what goes on in county government yet and I'm working on that process.

CN: Do you plan on engaging ethnic groups in some way? The county is so diverse. Every group has its own issues, its own needs, whether it be Chaldean, Arab, Hispanic or African American.

MH: When I hire I look for somebody who's going to be extremely confident in what they are doing and I will put anybody on the team that can make that happen. I don't say are they black or white, male or female. I'm going to make sure I have the most competent and qualified person, whatever their gender or nationality.

CN: Is more economic development in Macomb County one of your priorities?

MH: I don't think there is any municipality that doesn't see economic development as a priority. It's without question the biggest problem we are facing. Government doesn't create jobs; they create an environment for jobs to flourish. So I want to remove impediments and start creating an environment where people want to bring their business here so they can create jobs.

CN: What is the biggest problem this region is facing?

MH: I think the bipartisan issues; in my opinion it's the No. 1 area of concern. They polarize the public and even the media does this. Instead of addressing the real issue it's more about what is the politically correct thing to do. Many people running for office are more concerned with being elected as opposed to doing the right thing for the right reasons. I have four years to be county executive and in these four years I am not going to worry about what I am going to do so I can get re-elected. I am not going to do what's politically correct over what's correct. People elected me to do the right thing, to set a foundation for this county. My job is to figure out exactly how to do that in the best way possible.

CN: What do you think people have polarized?

MH: Pretty much any issue you want to talk about is polarized. When I say polarized I think it's extreme on either side of the party. And I don't think that is how the majority of the population thinks any more. I think there is more a moderate view from the public's perspective. Macomb County is a perfect example. Overwhelmingly, the support and the endorsement went to Rick Snyder in Macomb County for governor. At the same time, Macomb County voted a Democrat in for county executive. They looked at us as two people willing to come to the table and deal with the problems and find solutions. So many people look at what is going on as a party issue. This is anything but a party. What's happening right now requires some serious attention. I'm telling everybody put your party hat on the table because right now we have a lot of work to do.

CN: What was it that ultimately attracted you to the county executive seat?

MH: It had nothing to do with politicians because they weren't very supportive. I went out there and started realizing we needed a county executive to put us on equal footing. We are now going to have an equal voice in this region. We're also going to want an equal share, making sure we're not a donor county to the state or anywhere else. Macomb County hasn't had a strong voice in Lansing. I saw many political people wanting the position but I also questioned why they wanted it. I was not interested in people in it for their special interests or personal agenda, but only in it for Macomb County. I figured if these people are willing to work with me during the process, I'll do this job for the next four years.

CN: On what issues does Macomb County need to have a voice on the state level?

MH: Balancing our budgets and trying to figure out how we balance while we restructure. Without question, we need to look at shared services. We need to look at not only reorganizing and reconstructing at the county level but in conjunction with the locals. We need to figure out exactly how to attract reinvestment and how to become more competitive. People want to compete all the time in our region; we should not be competing. If one is successful then it's a benefit to the region. For example, Wayne County has the Aerotropolis, Oakland County has major advancements in healthcare, and in Macomb we have the defense industry and Lake St. Clair. How do we revitalize our lake so people don't just swim in it but also so we can get economic advantages from it? So we look at all of our advantages and we ask, how do we support each other on those instead of taking away from each other?